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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

The last official weekend of summer is upon us - Labor Day. I truly cannot believe that the summer months have sped by. There really wasn't much of a spring season this year; and the summer was either filled with weeks of rain, or hot and humid temperatures. I have to admit, however, that this final week of summer vacation has been almost perfect with regard to the weather. I guess if we're going out, we may as well go out with a bang!

We got a lot done around here this past week. Still a little more to go, but we also want to take some time out to relax. We haven't received a confirmation date yet for the new sunroom, but hopefully that will happen soon.

Well, I really didn't spend any time considering any particular topic to editorialize about. Opinions about the current state of spam and viruses are really obvious; what more can be said about these online pests. What was it Bill Gates said a couple of years ago? Oh yeah, I remember - security will be our top priority! Sure thing, Bill.

Please, there will be a lot of end-of-summer, Labor Day travelers out on the roads this weekend. Be safe!

Until next time...

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New Version of EMUAPC Atari 8-bit Emulator

New version of EMUAPC (0.92) is available.

main changes:

- Improved sound and keyboard initialization
The DOS version of EMUAPC works
with real DOS, Win 95/98/Me/NT/2K/XP
and Sound Blaster emulators for instance VDMSound;
- New option 'sound buffer' added;

- PC joystick support added;
- New option 'calibrate joystick' added;
- Fast cache added to the file decompressor;
- Function key Ctrl+PrintScrn changed to Ctrl+F2.

<http://www.komires.com/>

Atari Basic - XL Edition Book on the Web

The full text of the 1985 book "Atari Basic - XL Edition" is now online at atariarchives.org. Written by Bob Albrecht, LeRoy Finkel, and Jerald R. Brown, the book presents a guided tour to programming the Atari XL computers in Atari Basic.

<http://www.atariarchives.org/basicxl/>

The book is the follow-up to the 1979 book "Atari Basic - A Self-Teaching Guide," which is also on the Web at <http://www.atariarchives.org/basic/>

This is the 19th book to be made available at atariarchives.org.

AtarICQ 0.159 Is Released

Hi all,

A new release of the Atari GEM ICQ client for STiK is now available. This time the following major changes have been made:

- * Sound can now be configured in preferences dialog (Please read the HYP!)
- * Fixed a problem causing aICQ to enter "away" mode also when user wasn't idle
- * Right click on search results (UIN) will open "add contact" dialog
- * Support for several languages updated (French, German, Polish, Swedish)
- * Quite a few bug fixes, see update.txt for details

To download and read more about AtarICQ, please visit www.ataricq.org

Regards,

Joakim

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!

The Atari Computer Enthusiasts of Columbus, Ohio, wish to announce their 2003 swap and sale. Date: Saturday, September 13. Place: the same as it has been (mapquest to: 980 Lenore St., Columbus, Ohio - Oakland Park Community Center. A bmp scan of the map is available if you have a fast connection or can deal with zip). Time: same as it has been (9 am to 3 pm, EDT). Price: same as it has been (\$6 for a table which includes admission for one, \$4 for single admission, maximum of \$8 for family admission).

What to buy/sell: Though generally anything Atari and Atari-related, we're absolutely tolerant of other game systems, computers, electronics, software, etc. The CCAG gaming show in Cleveland was canceled for 2003 ... you folks are all welcome!

This year ACEC will NOT be doing a massive mailing campaign due to cost. I will be mailing to the 30-odd who indicated they have wished snail mail. Therefore, please help us get the word out: post everywhere of which you know, e-mail your friends, etc. Also, if you wish, let me know of physical and e-mailing addresses for almost-certain attendees. In a similar vein, let me know if you want OFF these mailing lists.

See ACEC's web page at:

<http://www.angelfire.com/oh4/acec/acec.html>

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Yep, another week has come and gone, and we can now see summer's end off in the distance. It's been a weird summer. It hasn't been incredibly hot here in the Northeast, but the humidity has been intense. As far as heat is concerned, we've been much luckier than most of Europe.

You'll have to excuse me this week. My mind has been jumping back and forth between subjects for so long now that I'm almost continuously free-associating. My wife says that having a conversation with me is like watching television and switching channels every 30 seconds.

Anyway, the heat hasn't been horrible, but the humidity has, and we're coming up on the end of it soon. Whew. I guess all that's left to do now is to wait for winter so I can complain about the cold and snow. Nahh.. I don't mind the cold. I'm one of those cold weather types.

It's past closest approach now, but if you get the chance to take a look at Mars through a telescope over the next month or so, don't pass it up. Even through a small telescope, it's kind of awe-inspiring. And realizing that we haven't been this close to Mars in almost 60 thousand years is kind of neat. Don't get me wrong, the difference between the distance now

and most other close-approaches doesn't make a big difference. It's a couple of percent difference or so, if I remember correctly. It's like the difference between a golf ball and a ping-pong ball at five football fields distance. If you're an avid Mars-watcher you might notice a bit more detail if your telescope is powerful enough.

So it's not the increased proximity that makes it special. What is it then? Perhaps it's the sense of history. The fact that, the last time we were this close to Mars, we... well, actually, we weren't even here. As a species, I mean. Sure, there were Neanderthals, but we descend from different stock. There is some contention about it, but if you took one of THEM and one of US and compared, you'd see that there was in fact a difference. 'They' had not yet become 'us'. There were no cities, no continental electric grids, no computers, no ozone hole, no nukes, and no contested elections. Well, not on THIS planet, anyway. <grin>

Well, let's get to the news, hints, tips, and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Philippe Kirsch asks for info about his 'new' 1040:

"I just got my hands on an old 1040stf, and i was wondering if i could use it as a midi sequencer. Therefore, i have the following questions:

*Do you need an atari mouse or will any serial mouse do the job?

*I found little information about the HDD connector. What interface type is it? I have an SCSI and a LPT zip drive, any possibility to use any of them?

*As i'm interested in using it as a sequencer, how many midi channels does it have?

*Where can i get a copy of cubase for atari?"

J.J/ van de Grutier tells Philippe:

"You can't put serial mice directly in the Atari mouse port, but you can use serial mice with the serial port of the Atari (if it doesn't fit, even most PC shops will have converters) and you need a driver like Genmouse (free software). Works fantastic. There are also third party Atari/Amiga mice which will fit in the Atari mouse port."

Henk Robbers finds a SCSI hard drive and asks about the particulars:

"I laid my hands on the following Hard drive:

IBM DDPS - 34560

I did some search in the WEB and found few additional words along the above:

single ended ultra-1 SCSI

Can it be a differential one?

Well, it might just have been ditched for a reason."

Michael Schwingen tells Henk:

"If it **is** single-ended, then it is not differential.

However, from a web search, you can't be sure which version you have - many SCSI drives are available in both interface variants."

Henk tells Michael:

"OK, not being a technician, that was what I wanted to know

The disk has 50 pins.

I have set the following jumpers:

```
1 spare = 0
2 id bit 2 = 0
3 id bit 1 = 0
4 id bit 0 = 1
5 enable autospin = 0
6 scsi termination = 1
7 disable unit attention = 1
8 ti sync nego = 0
9 autostart delay = 0
10 delay start 6/12 = 0
11 disable parity = 1
12 led out not connected
```

AHDI recognizes a scsi disc on 1.0 but doesn't get a name.
After that the correctly recognized disk on 0.0 cannot be read
and the TT starts up with the empty desktop although there
is a C harddisc icon below the standard A & B icons.

Looks like the termination thingy.

I haven't tried jumper 8, 9 & 10."

Jim DeClercq adds:

"Try jumpering 5, unless you already tried it and found it did not help.

The disk has to be spinning before it can be read, but some other machines start the motor and wait. If that makes the disk spin when power is applied, it is what you want to do. You should be able to hear that.

I have had that particular symptom when I had the external disk set to address zero.

Does your drive have an on-board LED to indicate it is active? That LED should illuminate when you apply power, as the drive initializes itself, stay lit for a few seconds, and then go dark.

If it never goes off, the drive may be dead, or just disconnected. If no on-board LED, hook up the external. There are only two ways, and one of

them is right.

Since the logic true state of jumper pins is a bit uncertain, first do what is necessary to get the thing spun up when power is applied, and that might mean fiddling a bit with jumpers, particularly 5, 9.

If it does spin up when power is applied, and it is connected properly (you can get an incorrect connection from a 68-pin drive with a 50-pin adapter with no pullups), there is likely an unfixable problem."

Djordje Vukovic adds his thoughts:

"Probably 5 should be ON (i.e. 1). State of 6 depends on physical layout of devices on the SCSI chain- is IBM disk at the end? If so, then 6 = ON correctly, but any other termination on other devices or the cable itself should be removed (seeing that the new disk causes problems with the previously installed one, I am inclined to think of improper termination, or maybe even a bad cable). Jumper 7 seems to be ON correctly (this caused problem to me with TOS2.06 while it was OFF). I am not familiar with effects of 8,9,10, but from their names they seem to be important as well, at least 8. State of jumper 11 should match capability of the controller in your machine, but ON (i.e. disabled) is probably correct.

Maybe this could be of some help as well:

1: Until I properly configured it, my IBM disk was not correctly recognized by the computer. I had to additionally reset the computer to get everything working properly. Of course, this is not an acceptable option for everyday work, but might be of help to determine whether the disk is ok.

2: Even now various disk formatting/partitioning utilities (e.g. AHDI, ICD, Hushi...) utilities obtain various results when trying to notice my IBM disk. Sometimes a repeated SCSI scan results in recognition while the first one does not. Also, for some reason, some of them (I think Hushi) could not recognize it when searching was enabled for other SCSI-IDs past the IBM's one. This all probably sounds rather horrifying, but amazingly all those drivers normally recognize the disk at bootup and it works very reliably. I don't know why is it that -only- bus-scan programs and the said formatting utilities have problems. Possibly it even has nothing to do with the disk but with the controller/adapter (a Ge-Soft, one, I don't remember the model)."

Greg Goodwin asks Henk:

"What are you connecting it to? Also, I've run into a couple of drives over the years that worked with external terminators but not with the termination jumper. Try a few variations."

Michael Schwingen tells Henk that it...

"Might also be a drive that *requires* bus arbitration. Use the SCSI port on a TT or Falcon, try to use HDdriver with arbitration enabled. Connect the disk to an external power supply and power it up *after* the machine has booted, and then start the driver, because TOS may access the disk without arbitration during boot, which may be enough to make the disk look dead.

Otherwise, it may still be a differential interface."

Henk gets all the pieces together and tells everyone:

"OK I have the disc in a external box connected to the SCSI port at the back of the TT. This worked with a QUANTUN LPS340 (which has passive termination).

I first power up the external IBM. it starts to spin slowly (low noise). When I power up the TT the disc immediately accelerates to probably its working speed (7200 RPM). (loud noise)
The disc keeps spinning fast, even after I switch off the TT again.

I just received HDDRiver from Uwe, so I can try out your suggestions."

Paul Malcolm asks about using Cubase with MagiC:

"Is anyone using CUBASE ver 2.1 with an STe and MagiC 6, if so, HOW? I keep getting bombs every time I try to use it. I've installed it as single prg but it makes no difference."

While simple answers can be the most satisfying, they can also be the most disappointing. Maurits van de Kamp tells Paul:

"Cubase doesn't work under MagiC, sorry."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section
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- Classic Gaming Expo 2003,
  A Retrospective Look!
  'Manhunt' Delayed!
  And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Microsoft Wins OK for Xbox Wireless Adapter

Microsoft Corp. has won federal approval for a wireless adapter for its Xbox video game console that allows players to connect to the Internet without cabling, according to a posting on a regulatory Web site.

The site for the Office of Engineering and Technology of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission shows that approval for the unit was granted late on Thursday.

A Microsoft spokeswoman said the FCC posted the information about the device in error, but she confirmed the adapter had been approved. She said the government office had agreed to a request to keep product details confidential ahead of a planned product launch.

Microsoft declined to say when the launch would be.

The approval on the federal office's site includes a number of exhibits, among them internal and external photographs of the device, as well as the user's manual that would presumably ship with the product.

However, the spokeswoman said the photos on the FCC Web site are not pictures of the final product.

The unit that is shown is black, with an antenna on the right side and the green "XBOX" logo stamped on its top. It also has a stamp that says "54 Mbps," a common reference to the wireless standard for speeds of 54 megabits per second.

The application for the device's authorization, also posted on the FCC site, listed Advance Data Technology Corp. of Taiwan as the technical contact.

The documents did not list any pricing details, and the Microsoft spokeswoman did not disclose them.

A number of other companies, including the Linksys unit of Cisco Systems Inc., make and market wireless adapters to connect online-enabled game consoles to the Internet. Those adapters generally sell for around \$100.

Take-Two Says to Launch Manhunt Game in November

Video game publisher Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. said on Friday it has delayed the launch of highly-anticipated game "Manhunt" until mid-November pushing it back by one quarter.

A spokeswoman for Take-Two was not immediately available to comment on the change from a planned October launch, but one analyst downplayed the move.

"I think that at this time of year, anything that shifts from October to November for Take-Two has nothing to do with an execution misstep," Wedbush Morgan Securities analyst Michael Pachter told Reuters. "The signal I get is 'we don't need the revenues in October because we're doing fine.'"

In an email announcing the official launch of the Web site for "Manhunt," Take-Two label Rockstar Games said the game was now coming out on Nov. 19. When it announced second fiscal quarter results in May, Take-Two had said the game would be out in its fiscal fourth quarter.

"Manhunt" is being developed by Rockstar North, the same team in Scotland responsible for hit games "Grand Theft Auto III" and "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City," which broke sales records in 2001 and 2002 and propelled Take-Two to the upper echelons of the game publishing business.

With no "Grand Theft Auto" game coming out this year, analysts had hoped "Manhunt," with its "GTA" pedigree, might fill the void.

Publisher THQ Inc. recently slashed its guidance for the fiscal second quarter, ending in September, after it moved two important games out of the quarter. Analysts were largely unconcerned with the move, though, as THQ maintained its overall guidance for the year.

Pachter said Take-Two might have at least one game ahead of schedule this fiscal year to make up for not having "Manhunt."

"My guess is you'll get Max Payne (on the) PC this year," he said. Some retail Web sites show the game shipping in late October, while others show it in early November.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online      -      Online Users Growl & Purr!
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A Considerable Town: Pac-Man Forever

Billy Mitchell discovered his calling early. It was 1981, and Billy was a teenager, with feathered hair, a faint mustache, and a Midas touch with a joystick: He was one of the best video-game players in the world. Preternatural was his skill then, and preternatural it remains 22 years later, which is why Billy was in Las Vegas last weekend to represent the Old Guard at the Classic Gaming Expo, the sixth session of the one convention devoted to the dawn of the video-game era.

Unlike E3, Los Angeles colossal contemporary gaming trade show where throngs of attendees wander through tens of millions of dollars worth of elaborate booths, video screens and PR flacks, the Classic Gaming Expo is a small, muted affair. This years event took place in a somewhat shabby meeting room at the Plaza, one of the cheerless downtown hotels long since overshadowed by glitzy development on the Vegas strip. The booths here, about 25 in all, were not bursting with giant plasma screens or stacks of JBL speakers. Most were just covered tables, a few chairs, a sign or two, and maybe a TV.

Not that the Expos simplicity diminished the enthusiasm of the participants. Classic gaming needs neither glamour nor marketing might, because it draws its strength from the purity of Pac-Man, the splendor of Defender. Forget the new rendering engine of Doom III; at the CG Expo, gaming is about you, the dots, and Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde.

This year, a couple thousand people showed up to talk, play and trade classic video games. Pioneers like John Harris, the creator of Frogger,

addressed their fans. Serious enthusiasts could tour the museum and ask the docents for more details about the rare Intellivision musical keyboard add-on, or the Vectrex voice modulator that made the home version of Berserk! sound like the one in the arcade (Get-the-hu-ma-noid . . . Get-the-in-tru-der!). And for attendees driven to collector frenzy by all the mint-condition boxed Odyssey2 and Spectravideo systems, there were vendors selling piles of original cartridges, emulators, all manner of paddles and trackballs, and even an anthology of early gaming-inspired poems and feuilletons called Blue Warrior Is About To Die.

Snafu, Demon Attack, Sub Hunt, Shark! Shark!, Tower of Doom, Microsurgeon, Preppie! II, Safecracker, Beam Rider, Kool-Aid Man its amazing how many electronic entertainments there were to be had at home in 1983. I was excited to find a copy of Rootbeer Tapper, which I once played extensively, and astonished to discover that there had been a game for the Atari 2600 called Porkys, based on the 1981 movie. (A good copy of the game, by the way, would run you 20 bucks.) And it seemed fitting that on the last day to file a candidacy application in California's premature gubernatorial hoo-hah, I would come across a copy of Campaign 84, a simulation for ColecoVision in which you become your own candidate and play politics like the game it really seems to be.

Then there was the phalanx of arcade games, about 50 or so standups at both ends of the room. And, check it out: They were free, bro! No need for eighth-grade agony over which game down at the 7-Eleven would eat up the last three quarters of your allowance; each game had endless credits, and an Expo badge holder could play as much as he or she wanted. Which is exactly what I did for hours. Highlights included: 41,300 points on Donkey Kong Jr. Over on Track and Field, I discovered my champion skeet-shooting abilities and managed a 9.2 on the long horse. And during my first 1-Up at Krull, I got 43,250 points, putting me at No. 25 in the Roll of Kings.

Those numbers, I should mention, are pretty lame peanuts compared to scores from official competition. According to Walter Days Official Video Game and Pinball Book of World Records, the best game of Krull, for example, was played in 1983, when Steve Harris achieved an extraordinarily even 6 million points. Walter himself was here in Las Vegas presiding over tournament play in a Footlocker referee shirt and recording the best scores.

And towering over him was Billy Mitchell, who, at 6-foot-3 and dressed in black, was impossible to miss, especially now that his mustache has become a beard, and his feathered hair has flowered into a strangely impressive pompadour-ish mullet. (Half of Silver Lake would trade all their free men to be able to rock what Billy Mitchell has on his head.) Billy wasn't playing so much, and he doesn't really need to, as he already holds world records for Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man, Burgertime, Centipede, Donkey Kong and Donkey Kong Jr. almost the entire gaming pantheon.

I do still compete, he told me. In fact, I'm working on an ultrasecret. He said this with utmost gravity and made furtive glances at passersby. What's the secret? Cant say, he said. Does anyone else know what it is? No. Not even Walter Day? Nope. Well, what the hell is it? Its a world record bigger than anything I've ever done.

What could be bigger than the worlds only perfect game of Pac-Man, which is another of Billy's achievements? Whatever the ultrasecret turns out to be, Billy's been working on it for a couple years, sometimes for several hours a day. Billy likes to say that he and his cohorts are to video games what the Blue Angels are to aviation, which sounds corny at first until

you realize that its sort of true: Hitting the far reaches of games like Dig Dug requires sustained, intense training, incredible focus, precision and stamina.

Early video games couldn't be paused or continued. When Tim McVey got more than a billion points (yes, a billion) on Nibbler in 1982, he did it with one quarter that was 44 hours of Nibbler for 25 cents. And when Billy played Centipede for two days straight in 1986, he had to go to the bathroom so badly he actually dragged the game into the restroom with him.

We do things that the average person cant do, he says. Things that no one should be able to do. Indeed, many of the companies that made early games say that they didn't think such high scores were possible. We play so long that the program runs out and there's no code left. At really high levels, parts of the screen disappear, Billy explains. Or the game gets so violent and fast its hopeless. We call that a killscreen.

Pac-Man, for example, goes haywire at level 256. Same thing with Dig Dug. Galaga ends in existential emptiness: Eventually, its just your ship and space. Which, when you think about it, kind of makes sense.

Upon hearing I was from Los Angeles, Billy expressed sympathy for our states political disarray. Then he suggested that the Davis recall could be solved with a video-game competition. Whoever wins would be governor, he said, which I thought was kind of strange, until he added, It would be just about as effective as the upcoming campaign. He has a point. And Arnold probably would win at Contra anyway.

Attack of the Retro Game Coders

Every summer in Las Vegas, the gamers descend for their annual convention. They come to see the hottest new wares for their favorite consoles and computers. But they're not interested in Microsoft's Xbox, Sony's Playstation 2, or Nintendo's GameCube. This is the Classic Gaming Expo.

They're hovering around the Commodore 64, the Atari 2600, the Amiga, and the Apple II: the vintage machines from the 1970s and 1980s that, in their minds, aren't just sources of nostalgia but platforms for exciting and new software. They are retro coders, writing fresh programs for old hardware.

Though some of these programmers sell their work, it's primarily a labor of love-and logic. They do this to prove their worth as programmers, says John Hardie, director of the Classic Gaming Expo. It's incredibly hard to write for these systems because of their limitations, their lack of space. When you're working with 4 kilobytes of RAM, it's the ultimate challenge.

For many diehard techies, this pioneering generation of machines elicits the same kind of goose bumps as a classic pop song might for a music fan. These early computers, after all, provided the first means for an armchair gamer to create his answer to Asteroids.

The Apple II, for example, has been a darling of the indie hacker set ever since the first machine was introduced at a meeting of the Homebrew Computer Club, a do-it-yourself group of programmers in California, a quarter century ago. Released in 1977, the Apple II was a groundbreaking, mass-market computer with a keyboard, compatibility with the BASIC programming language, and, best of all, color graphics. There was no hard

drive but it came with two game paddles. It was perfect for game making.

The important thing back then was that because the computers didn't have fancy graphics, the programmers had to make them fun to play, says Albert Yarusso, editor of Atari Age, an online magazine for fans of the early Atari systems. That's why they're still fun today.

Programming for these machines carries a similar appeal today as it did when the computers first came on the market, namely, their accessibility. In the 1970s and 80s, the video game market was dominated by proprietary arcade machines like Pac-Man and Space Invaders. Consumers could play these machines, but they couldn't hack them. The Commodore 64 and Apple II provided a means through which a self-taught coder with the will and the chops could write and play his own (it was usually, though not always, a guy thing) rudimentary software.

Today, the major video game consoles like the Xbox and Playstation 2 are just as exclusionary as the early arcade machines; the only way to write software for these systems is with an expensive development kit, reserved for a select group of developers approved by the makers of the game systems. Creating these elaborate games requires millions of dollars of capitalization, as well as teams of artists, coders, and designers that can encompass dozens of people.

Programming for the Commodore 64 or Amiga, on the contrary, can be done with an army of one. It's possible for one person to do all the code, says Malte ThunderBlade Munde, a 27-year-old retro programmer from Hamburg, Germany. You can code from scratch. Munde runs Protovision, a group of 13 like-minded homebrew coders around Europe who specialize in making new games for the Commodore 64. They collaborate almost entirely over the Internet, a few persons handling the music, for example, others dividing up the programming tasks.

Since 1997, Protovision has published several games, including Metal Dust, a shoot 'em up, Reel Fishing, a fishing game, and a mythological battle game called Botz. The games sell online for about \$25; so far, the group has sold 1,000 copies. That's not enough to quit their day jobs as computer programmers, but enough to pay for the beer at their annual Vision party - an event that's open to anyone who gets the warm fuzzies when he runs his fingers along a C64 keyboard.

Mike Mika, a 29-year-old programmer from San Francisco, prefers making games for the Atari 2600, the classic home video game system that debuted in 1977 and, after losing ground in 1984, remains a cultural icon. Mika's interest began with a childhood fascination with the arcade game Berzerk, a maze-based shooter in which the player hunts down a variety of robots who bark out commands like: Intruder alert! Intruder alert! The home version of the game, however, was missing the famous robot yells - a detail that irked Mika into his adulthood. So he decided to do something about it. In uber-nerd fashion, I took the free time I had over a week or two and implemented the one element that the original arcade game showcased, he says, and inserted that feature into the 2600 version of the game.

Retro coders who create games for the 2600 have the added challenge of packaging, since the software used to come on boxy, plastic cartridges. (The machine predates the CD by about six years.) To house their games, the programmers literally have to rip apart old cartridges and solder in their new chips. Mika, whose day job has him making games for the Xbox and Playstation 2, says all this effort is worth it, simply for the pure mathematical challenge that he doesn't find in a contemporary coding

environment.

The simplicity of the Atari 2600's programming environment makes it highly accessible when compared to today's elaborate, and expensive, console systems. The 2600 has barely any display hardware, Mika says. You have to time triggers to turn the pixels on and off as the raster beam in the television sweeps across the screen. You have to create elaborate timing tables just to get an ounce of decent resolution. Also, you can download an emulator, assembler, and debugger for free from the Internet and just make a game. The soul of an old machine comes from a sense of both nostalgia and surprise. It is like going back in time, he says. You discover something new every time you work with it.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Sobig.F Virus Slows, 2nd Attempt Fizzles

The fast-spreading Sobig.F e-mail virus slowed on Sunday and failed for a second time to launch a remote data attack using thousands of infected personal computers, computer security experts said.

Sobig.F, which first emerged on Aug. 18, was programmed by an unknown creator to unleash a data attack at noon PDT on Sunday.

But with the trigger - a computer program unwittingly installed on 20 poorly defended computers mostly in the United States and Canada - deactivated on Friday, Sunday's attempt was a non-event, according to reports from technology security company Symantec Corp. and Craig Schmugar, virus research engineer at rival Network Associates Inc.

An initial automated barrage planned for Friday was averted after government and security industry experts raced to defuse the digital trigger that could have taken control of more than 100,000 infected computers and possibly crippled the Internet.

The number of infected computers worldwide fell dramatically from Saturday to Sunday, declining by one-third in the 24-hour period to 98,205 from 145,264, according to a virus map from anti-virus software maker Trend Micro.

North America had the highest number of infected computers at 68,911, a one-day drop of 22 percent. Meanwhile, the number of infected computers in Europe declined by 51 percent to 26,727 machines. But from a smaller base, infections in Asia jumped 41 percent to 8,258, according to Tokyo-based Trend Micro's Web site.

"Now, it's a case of a big clean-up for (technicians) and learning a lesson for the next time there's an e-mail worm," said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant at British-based Sophos Anti-Virus.

The next time could be in weeks. SoBig.F is the sixth version of a virus that first appeared in January. Each one has been stronger than the previous, security officials said.

SoBig.F is programmed to expire on Sept. 10.

"We would expect to see the next one some time after September 10, not necessarily on September 11, but within the ensuing weeks," Cluley said.

The virus spreads when unsuspecting computer users open file attachments in e-mails that contain familiar headings like "Thank You!," and "Re: Details."

Once the file is opened, Sobig.F resends itself to e-mail addresses from the infected computer and signs the e-mail using a random name and address from the computer's address book.

SoBig.F was released on a sex-oriented Internet discussion group a week ago, according to security experts and EasyNews.com, the Internet service provider that supplied the discussion group with Web access.

In the ensuing days it spread to hundreds of thousands of computers and sent out millions of virus-infected e-mails.

Teenage Blaster Worm Suspect Arrested

The FBI on Friday arrested a teenager who admitted making a copycat version of the Blaster Internet worm, even as experts combed over data in the hunt for the creator of the virus that devastated computers all over the world.

Jeffrey Lee Parson, 18, of Hopkins, Minnesota, a middle-class suburb west of Minneapolis, was arrested at home on one count of intentionally causing or attempting to cause damage to a computer. The arrest was the result of a joint investigation by the U.S. Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Parson, described in the complaint as being 6-feet-4-inches tall and weighing 320 pounds, sported a bleached blond mop of hair atop a closely-cropped fringe of brown hair. He wore a faded gray T-shirt with "Big Daddy" spelled out on the front, as well as cargo shorts and high-top sneakers.

At an initial hearing in St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S. Magistrate Judge Susan Nelson ordered Parson to be held under house arrest, though he can leave to attend high school and medical appointments.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Paul Luehr had argued for keeping Parson in jail, based on the "grievous and substantial" harm he had caused computer users.

The judge forbade him from using the Internet, surfing the World Wide Web or using instant messaging and instant relay chat. She also told Parson there had been threats made against him and she was concerned for his safety.

The suspect had previously admitted to law enforcement officials that he created a variant of the worm, according to a complaint filed in the

Western District of Washington state. Parson's next court hearing will be Sept. 17 in Seattle.

Parson admitted modifying Blaster and creating a variant known by different names, including "W32/Lovesan.worm.b" and admitted he renamed the original code, dubbed "MSBlast.exe," "teekids.exe" after his online alias, the complaint said.

Parson also said he included a hidden Trojan horse program called "Lithium" in the worm, leaving a back door so he could reconnect remotely to the infected computers later.

FBI agents interviewed Parson when they searched his home on Aug. 19 and seized seven computers.

Blaster and its variants are self-replicating Internet worms that bore into machines using Microsoft Corp.'s Windows operating system through a security hole, harnessing them to launch concerted data attacks via the Internet on a Microsoft technical service Web site.

At least 7,000 "drone" computers tried to attack the Microsoft Web site, the complaint said. Microsoft thwarted the attacks by disconnecting the Web address from the Internet.

Blaster is believed to have infected hundreds of thousands of computers worldwide since it was released on Aug. 11.

The Internet addresses of infected computers were sent to the t33kid.com Web site. That site was traced back to Parson through Brian Davis, of Watauga, Texas, who leased Web hosting services to Parson, according to the complaint.

Davis told officials he knew "teekid" had performed Internet attacks and written various Internet worms, the complaint said.

The t33kid.com site is registered to Parson at an address in Hopkins, Minnesota. A phone number at that address is registered to R. Parson. A woman who answered the telephone there declined to comment.

The alias also appears to have been used to deface the Web site of the Minnesota Government Finance Owners Association, and there are messages from "Teekid" on message boards related to trojans - small programs that hackers plant on computers.

Could Sobig Have Been Contained?

Some Internet service providers and experts disagreed Monday on whether an Arizona Internet service provider that has been identified as the launching pad for the Sobig virus could have contained the malevolent code that raised havoc among home computer users and corporate networks last week.

Easynews Inc. was subpoenaed late last week by the FBI, which was seeking account information related to the uploading of the virus to the ISP's Usenet news group server. The virus, disguised as an adult photo, was posted Aug. 18 through a home computer on a cable modem.

The computer had been hacked by an unknown user and the Easynews account

was created with a stolen credit card, apparently for the sole purpose of uploading the virus, Michael Minor, chief technology officer for the Arizona ISP said in a statement. Easynews was cooperating with the FBI.

FBI and Easynews officials did not return phone calls Monday.

Steve Ratzlaff, director of marketing for SFF Net, a Plano, Texas, ISP, said the volume of traffic on Easynews's network would probably have made it impossible to scan every file for viruses.

"The only thing the actual host of that news server could have done is scan their groups for virus executables, and if your hosting a large number of groups, then that isn't practical," Ratzlaff said. "In this case, the protection has to be on the end user machine."

Ratzlaff was unaware of any monitoring systems capable of handling the traffic on your average ISP, noting that even the FBI's computer systems can only monitor a sample of traffic on the Internet backbone in searching for illegal activity.

However, Eric Hemmendinger, security analyst for market researcher Aberdeen Group, said Easynews might have been helped by spam filters that would have been triggered by the sudden surge in virus-infected emails launched by Sobig, a mass-mailing program that propagated itself by stealing email addresses from computers.

"If you had spam filters in place, depending on how they were configured and what they were looking for, you could have shut this down real fast," Hemmendinger said.

Anti-virus systems also might have helped, but they would only be effective at stopping a virus like Sobig from spreading if all ISPs used the software, which would probably be too expensive for a lot of companies. "From a financial perspective, it's pretty hard to justify for a lot of these folks," Hemmendinger said.

ISPs that cater to business would probably have a less difficult time raising prices to justify the cost of virus-prevention software, if the added feature could be proven to be effective. Consumer services, however, may have a more difficult time, because those markets are more price sensitive, with customers willing to jump to a competitor quickly to save a few dollars a month.

The virus, dubbed Sobig.F, is considered one of the most virulent mass-mailing viruses ever. The malevolent program infected hundreds of thousands of computers and sent millions of virus-carrying emails across the Internet, clogging home email boxes and slowing corporate networks.

Sobig.F, the fifth variant of the original Sobig virus sent in January, struck a week after a separate virus, dubbed Blaster, wreaked havoc among computer users globally. Both viruses only affected computers running Microsoft Corp.'s Windows operating system.

McAfee Upgrades VirusScan With Added Worm-Blocking Oomph

McAfee Security Consumer on Monday introduced a new version of McAfee VirusScan, with new capabilities designed to block worms from spreading.

The new WormStopper technology automatically detects and alerts users when their systems are attempting to send e-mail to an unusually large number of addresses, and also alerts users when the system attempts to send out too many single e-mails in a 30-second period.

The new technology is designed to block worms like Sobig, Lovsan, and Nachi, which attempt to e-mail copies of themselves out to addresses found on users' PCs.

The new version also protects against spyware, adware, and Web dialers. It's also designed to protect against harmful software sent through instant message attachments, and block malicious scripts.

The software is available immediately for \$34.95 per user from the McAfee Web site. McAfee is a division of Network Associates.

ISPs Add Filters to Anti-Virus Arsenal

In an attempt to minimize the damage caused by computer viruses, some of the world's largest Internet service providers are planning to scan all e-mail attachments before they reach their customers' inboxes.

Comprehensive scanning could cost ISPs millions of dollars, but after repeated e-mail attacks capped by the latest version of the "Sobig" virus, customers are beginning to expect it, industry experts said.

"Virus filtering is quickly becoming one of the checkmarks for the big ISPs," said Todd Dean, director of data operations and support for Atlanta-based Cox Communications, which has 1.7 million Internet customers.

Cox does not regularly block attachments, but is strengthening its blocking policy after getting hit with the Sobig virus last Wednesday. The company took on at least 250,000 infected e-mails - about 10,000 an hour - before it was able to fight it off, Dean said.

Several of the most prominent ISPs already scan customer e-mail, including America Online, the Microsoft Network, Comcast, Covad and the AOL Time Warner Road Runner network.

"We've tried to make it as seamless as possible so that users don't have to take any action to make sure e-mail protection is in place for them," said MSN Product Manager Larry Grothaus.

Dulles, Va.-based AOL said that more than half of the 226 million e-mails it filtered last week were infected by the Sobig virus.

About 90 percent of all Internet worms and viruses spread via e-mail, according to MessageLabs, a New York-based e-mail security company.

But filtering can be an expensive and risky endeavor, said Michael Rasmussen, an analyst with Forrester Research and vice president of the Information Systems Security Association, a nonprofit trade association for security professionals.

"With ISPs of those sizes, you're easily looking at ongoing costs of several million dollars, not just the cost of purchasing the technology,

but of making it work with your existing systems, administrative costs and increased support costs associated with customers who are confused about what to do when their ISP tells them they have an e-mail with a virus inside," he said.

ISPs also run the risk that they might accidentally filter out legitimate e-mail, exposing themselves to legal liability, Rasmussen said.

The financial commitment could be especially tough for companies suffering through the economic slump, said Howard Schmidt, the Bush administration's former cybersecurity czar and the former chief security officer of Microsoft Corp.

Many service providers will eat the cost because customers won't stay with ISPs that fail to provide it, said Stewart Baker, former general counsel to the National Security Agency and an attorney representing some of the nation's largest ISPs.

"Anything that makes people afraid to go on the Internet is bad for ISPs," Baker said. "They're going to want to do whatever they can in order to make people feel that going online is a safe thing to do."

Atlanta-based EarthLink, the nation's third-largest ISP with almost 1 million subscribers, said it hopes to offer e-mail virus blocking for all of its customers by October, said spokesman Dave Blumenthal.

BellSouth, with 1.2 million digital-subscriber line (DSL) customers, had planned to scan all attachments by the end of the year, but now wants to put the plan in place by October, said spokesman Joe Chandler.

Verizon Corp., the largest DSL provider in the Washington area, expects its 1.9 million customers to take care of their own security needs, said spokeswoman Briana Gowing.

Verizon Online does not filter e-mails, but offers subscribers a free 90-day subscription to Zone Alarm Pro, a firewall program that includes protection against 47 of the most common e-mail viruses. In May, the company began offering users a free subscription to MSN 8, which includes the same anti-virus protection that Hotmail accounts have.

The company did take steps to block the Sobig virus during its attack last week, she said.

Home computer users can protect themselves from most online threats by installing firewalls and security patches, as well as frequently updated anti-virus software. Most of them don't renew their anti-virus subscriptions after the usual three-month offers that they accept when they first turn on their computers, experts said.

Home users also often ignore virus protection advice, making it more important for ISPs to kill viruses before unwitting users click on the attachments that spawn them, said Alan Paller, research director for the SANS Institute, a security training group based in Bethesda, Md.

"Users should not be asked to protect themselves any more than they should be asked to go buy seat belts and airbags and install them in their own cars," Paller said. "That's got to come with their service, even if it comes with an added price."

Computer Experts Brace for New Virus Version on September 11

With computer networks still mopping up from last week's SoBig virus outbreak, some experts warned that a more powerful version of the worm could appear around September 11.

The virus, described as the fastest spreading ever on the Internet, appeared to be contained by Monday but experts were expecting a new version that could be more damaging.

Security specialists said the SoBig.F virus, which was sent to millions of computers worldwide, is programmed to deactivate on September 10, leading to speculation that new version could appear sometime around September 11.

"The MO (modus operandi) of the author is to release a new version just before the expiry of the last one," said Mark Summer, chief technology officer at security firm MessageLabs.

"I would extrapolate that it's highly likely we would see a new version on the 10th or just before it."

Some analysts said the virus appears to have been created by a sort of evil mastermind who is playing a game of cat-and-mouse with law enforcement and computer security experts.

"He's kind of playing with everyone, he knows how to get around the antivirus products," said Bruce Hughes, a malicious code expert at the security firm TruSecure.

"We're kind of puppets, he has all the tools we have. He's not just a virus writer, he's more than that ... we know he was using stolen credit cards to post messages. He not only wants to spread a virus, he wants to install a back door" that can allow infected computers to be hijacked.

Steven Sundermeier at another security firm, Central Command, said he expects a new version of the virus that could be more malicious.

"If the past repeats itself, we could be looking at a newly constructed creation shortly after September 10," he said.

"A potential risk is that the massive army created by Worm/Sobig.F could be used to launch an all out attack on large Internet infrastructures," Sundermeier said in a statement.

According to Central Command, the virus installs a program that can retrieve further instructions that may include the downloading and execution of a backdoor hacker program.

The virus creator "may draw on (infected computers) to be part of a cyber army focusing a digital assault against major online services," Central Command said.

Sunner downplayed the likelihood of an attempt to cripple the Internet with the SoBig virus, but said the author appears to be "tweaking" the program to evade most security systems and get maximum impact.

Sunner said the SoBig virus appears to be different from most other worms because of the technical sophistication of its creator and its use of spam

e-mail. While many other virus are larks created by adolescents, this one may be different.

"It looks very much like it is used to create launchpads to send spam, so there may be a commerical motivation," Sunner said. It is also far more efficient is multiplying itself, using computer to send thousands of e-mails per second.

The Sobig.F virus, a "worm" virus so-called because of its ability to infect computer operating systems without human intervention, multiplies by using e-mail addresses it finds in computers it infects. Experts say it is the fastest propagation system yet encountered.

Though the virus does not paralyze the computer, it considerably slows the network to which it is hooked up, and can bring servers to a halt with so-called "spam," or unsolicited e-mails.

Coming so soon after the MSBlast and Lovesan viruses, computer defense experts had earlier warned that cyberspace now faces a major new threat and that they have never seen a virus like Sobig which spreads so quickly.

Symantec Goes After Rogue Applications

Symantec Corp. on Monday announced that the next version of its Norton AntiVirus product will include technology to protect against rogue applications such as keystroke loggers and spyware.

Even as viruses like SoBig and others continue to rampage across the Internet and infect machines almost at will, emerging threats, including spyware, Trojans and others, are becoming more and more prevalent and harder to detect and remove. NAV 2004 will be capable of blocking these applications if they're embedded in e-mail or instant messages, and will also have the ability to find them during regular system scans.

Spyware and Trojans often are found in freeware or shareware programs downloaded from the Internet and are also common in the peer-to-peer clients distributed for free by file-sharing networks. Malicious software also tends to show up in the files traded on such networks. To help prevent these threats from getting onto users' machines, NAV 2004 can scan compressed files in real time, as they're downloaded. This feature is only available to Windows 2000 and XP users.

All of these features will be included in both the consumer and professional editions of NAV. But the professional edition will also include a data recovery feature and something that Symantec is calling "digital shredding." This feature is designed to render deleted files completely irretrievable.

NAV 2004 will ship in early September, and the professional version will start at \$69.95.

Also on Monday, Symantec, of Cupertino, Calif., unveiled its new AntiVirus for Handhelds product line. Designed for PDAs running either the Palm OS or Pocket PC software, the product can perform scheduled or on-demand scanning and also includes the LiveUpdate service. This feature enables users to download virus definitions and upgrades directly from the Symantec site.

AntiVirus for Handhelds will be available by the end of August.

EarthLink Sues to Stop Alabama, Vancouver Spammers

Internet provider EarthLink Inc. said it sued seeking to break two e-mail "spam" rings Wednesday, charging that operators in Alabama and British Columbia flooded its network with some 250 million unwanted commercial messages.

As many as 100 individuals could be involved in the two schemes, which hide behind a veil of bogus Web sites and e-mail accounts bought with stolen credit-card numbers, the Atlanta-based ISP charged in its complaint.

EarthLink filed suit in a U.S. court in Atlanta to compel telephone companies, Web domain sellers and other vendors to turn over information related to the two rings, which have cost the company some \$5 million in employee time and wasted bandwidth, a company lawyer said.

"We have some good clues and suspicions, but we're not able to definitively identify them," said Karen Cashion, EarthLink assistant general counsel.

According to the complaint, one group sent offers for herbal Viagra, dating services, and do-it-yourself spam kits from hundreds of dial-up EarthLink accounts in and around Birmingham, Alabama. The group paid their bills with stolen credit-card and bank-account numbers and hid behind a web of false names, addresses and companies to hide their identities, the suit contended.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, another group used stolen credit-card numbers to set up hundreds of EarthLink accounts as well, the complaint said. That team then attempted to trick Internet users into divulging credit-card numbers, account passwords and other sensitive personal information by posing as another Internet provider that had lost account information, the complaint said.

Cashion said once it had identified them, EarthLink would sue those involved for damages, attorneys' fees and damage to its reputation, and would also seek to bar them from Internet use.

"We want to put them out of business," she said.

EarthLink won a \$16.4 million judgment in May against a Buffalo, New York, man who sent some 825 million spam messages over a one-year period. Accused spammer Howard Carmack also faces criminal charges for identity theft and forgery.

RIAA Discloses Some Methods of Tracking

The recording industry is providing its most detailed glimpse into some of the detective-style techniques it has employed as part of its secretive campaign against online music swappers.

The disclosures were included in court papers filed against a Brooklyn

woman fighting efforts to identify her for allegedly sharing nearly 1,000 songs over the Internet. The recording industry disputed her defense that songs on her family's computer were from compact discs she had legally purchased.

According to the documents, the Recording Industry Association of America examined song files on the woman's computer and traced their digital fingerprints back to the former Napster file-sharing service, which shut down in 2001 after a court ruled it violated copyright laws.

The RIAA, the trade group for the largest record labels, said it also found other evidence inside the woman's music files suggesting the songs were recorded by other people and distributed across the Internet.

Comparing the Brooklyn woman to a shoplifter, the RIAA told U.S. Magistrate John M. Facciola that she was "not an innocent or accidental infringer" and described her lawyer's claims otherwise as "shockingly misleading."

The RIAA papers were filed Tuesday night in Washington and made available by the court Wednesday.

The woman's lawyer, Daniel N. Ballard, of Sacramento, Calif., said the music industry's latest argument was "merely a smokescreen to divert attention" from the related issue of whether her Internet provider, Verizon Internet Services Inc., must turn over her identity under a copyright subpoena.

"You cannot bypass people's constitutional rights to privacy, due process and anonymous association to identify an alleged infringer," Ballard said.

Ballard has asked the court to delay any ruling for two weeks while he prepares his arguments, and he noted that his client - identified only as "nycfashiongirl" - has already removed the file-sharing software from her family's computer.

The RIAA accused "nycfashiongirl" of offering more than 900 songs by the Rolling Stones, U2, Michael Jackson and others for illegal download, along with 200 other computer files that included at least one full-length movie, "Pretty Woman."

The RIAA's latest court papers describe in unprecedented detail some sophisticated forensic techniques used by its investigators.

For example, the industry disclosed its use of a library of digital fingerprints, called "hashes," that it said can uniquely identify MP3 music files that had been traded on the Napster service as far back as May 2000. Examining hashes is commonly used by the FBI and other computer investigators in hacker cases.

By comparing the fingerprints of music files on a person's computer against its library, the RIAA believes it can determine in some cases whether someone recorded a song from a legally purchased CD or downloaded it from someone else over the Internet.

Copyright lawyers said it remains unresolved whether consumers can legally download copies of songs on a CD they purchased rather than making digital copies themselves. But finding MP3 music files that precisely match copies that have been traded online could be evidence a person participated in file-sharing services.

"The source for nycfashiongirl's sound recordings was not her own personal CDs," the RIAA's lawyers wrote.

The recording industry also disclosed that it is examining so-called "metadata" tags, hidden snippets of information embedded within many MP3 music files. In this case, lawyers wrote, they found evidence that others had recorded the music files and that some songs had been downloaded from known pirate Web sites.

The industry has won approval for more than 1,300 subpoenas compelling Internet providers to identify computer users suspected of illegally sharing music files on the Internet.

Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs' Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, has promised hearings on the industry's use of copyright subpoenas to track downloaders.

The RIAA has said it expects to file at least several hundred lawsuits seeking financial damages as early as next month. U.S. copyright laws allow for damages of \$750 to \$150,000 for each song offered illegally on a person's computer, but the RIAA has said it would be open to settlement proposals from defendants.

The campaign comes just weeks after U.S. appeals court rulings requiring Internet providers to readily identify subscribers suspected of illegally sharing music and movie files.

Kazaa Launches Premium Service

The developers of peer-to-peer file sharing program Kazaa are launching Friday a fee-carrying version of the software, a further step in their efforts to shake off Kazaa's reputation as a piracy haven and to build a viable business around the software.

A \$30 fee buys users a license to Kazaa Plus, which is advertising-free and offers more-advanced search and download options. Kazaa owner Sharman Networks will continue distributing a free version of Kazaa, which is partially supported by pop-up and banner ads.

Under the new Kazaa Plus, users can download files from as many as 40 sources at once. The move does away with the eight-source restriction on the free version of the client.

Kazaa Plus also provides enhanced virus protection and customer support via e-mail, according to Sharman Networks.

Kazaa remains one of the peer-to-peer services in the sights of governmental regulators and entertainment industry executives because of the file pirating that its network enables.

Earlier this year, Sharman Networks released a software update that allowed the company to sell "premium" music, software, and video files through Kazaa.

As an apparent move toward legal legitimacy, the content in that selection came from professional content creators. The update even included a "frequent customer" program with points and prizes.

Earthlink Updates Service, Adds Features

Internet service provider Earthlink is looking to keep pace with competitors AOL and MSN as it rolls out its latest service update. Called Total Access 2004, the upgrade offers a handful of new software features, as well as improved performance for all Earthlink dial-up users.

The software updates include improved parental controls, updated spam and ad-blocking tools, and new spyware protection. And on the network side, Earthlink will now offer all of its dial-up customers access to an acceleration service that improves throughput speeds. Previously the company charged a \$7 premium for the service; now all 4 million of its dial-up customers get the service as part of their \$22-per-month subscription.

The Total Access 2004 software suite will be available for download August 27, with CD-ROM distribution starting September 5.

Earthlink rival America Online recently updated its software. Earthlink's launch also comes as Microsoft readies an update to its MSN 8 Internet service and software.

In an effort to shield its users from the ever-growing onslaught of Web annoyances, Earthlink is rolling out a series of new and improved services. The new Enhanced Pop-Up Blocker software promises to stop traditional pop-up ads, as well as multimedia Flash advertisements that load on Web pages. Later this year the company will launch a new feature called SpyBlocker that will offer similar relief from adware and spyware. And in that same timeframe the company expects to launch its own antivirus software.

Earthlink is also focusing on better spam-blocking tools for its Total Access Mail service. The company has added challenge-response technology that directs e-mailers not on your "safe" list to a Web site where they have to prove they're a real person, not a spam-sending computer.

Finally, Earthlink is beefing up its parental-control features, giving parents the ability to better personalize levels of access for their children. In addition, the company will offer a free child-friendly browser called KidPatrol that limits Internet access to "safe" Web sites.

Attention to advanced e-mail functions and family-safe browsing is something of a reversal of strategy for Earthlink, experts say.

In the past the company positioned its service as an alternative to the hand-holding of AOL and MSN. However, over the past year Earthlink has added a number of premium services, from music subscription services to voicemail, bringing it closer in parity with competitive offerings from AOL and MSN.

Earthlink is becoming more like AOL and MSN, says Joe Laszlo, senior analyst with Jupiter Research. That said, it's clear that AOL and MSN have followed Earthlink's lead in offering spam and ad-blocking technologies, he says.

With 1 million broadband and 4 million dial-up subscribers, Earthlink is

the third-largest Internet service provider in the United States. AOL is the largest with 25.4 million subscribers, followed by MSN, which says it has 8.6 million subscribers (including Internet access, Hotmail premium services, and MSN mobile services). Up-and-coming provider United Online says it has 2.5 million paying subscribers and an additional 2.7 million subscribers to free accounts.

AOL Adds Blogging Tools

America Online continued to court users with new content and services this week, adding both Web logging tools and expanded National Football League audio and video programming to its grab bag of Internet offerings.

The Dulles, Virginia, Internet service provider introduced the AOL Journals feature Monday, allowing users to create an online journal, or blog, replete with photos and even MP3 sounds.

The journals are free to members and can be written and updated on the Web, as well as by AOL Instant Messenger, cell phone text messages, or the telephone through the AOL by Phone service.

The journals are aimed at boosting AOL's community feel; other members can post comments or feedback. The feature is integrated with AOL's Picture Finder and allows users to embed photos in their text entries.

AOL isn't the only Internet service provider interested in blogging, as Google has gotten into the game recently with its buy of Pyra Labs, the company behind the Blogger site. Additionally, Yahoo said this week that its South Korean subsidiary is offering a new blogging service.

AOL is also playing up to sports fans, announcing an expanded alliance with the NFL Tuesday to provide broadband users exclusive programming.

AOL for Broadband subscribers are being offered free access to NFL game previews, highlights, commentary, and other programming.

The new features come on the heels of a series of new offerings from the ISP as it fights to retain and win more users in the fiercely competitive market. Already this year AOL has introduced a voice-mail service; a premium antivirus offering; extra security features; and a stand-alone Communicator application that allows users to manage e-mail, contacts, and personalized news.

Microsoft Readies New Version of MSN

When Microsoft Corp. unveiled a multimillion-dollar makeover of its MSN Internet-browsing software last fall, the company had 9 million subscribers and a \$300 million marketing campaign designed to draw hordes of new customers.

It didn't quite work out the way Microsoft envisioned. Today, the software company has 400,000 fewer MSN subscribers than it did a year ago.

But Microsoft is hoping its newest version of MSN - which is being released

to beta testers next week - will help recapture customers who have graduated from slower dial-up services offered by MSN in favor of high-speed or "broadband" connections offered by cable and telecommunications companies.

"The past year has been a big year for the whole industry," said Lisa Gurry, MSN group product manager. "Although we could see the potential for broadband, it was not our primary focus. It turns out that it should have been our primary focus."

Microsoft is offering the new service, called MSN Premium, through partnerships with broadband companies including Verizon, Qwest, and Charter Communications. But it also hopes to boost its customer base by marketing the package of browsing software and services to those who buy their access from non-Microsoft-partners. MSN plans to charge those customers \$9.95 monthly.

MSN still significantly trails America Online in total number of subscribers, with AOL's U.S. customer base at more than 25 million. But AOL has lost 846,000 subscribers in the last quarter alone.

The new MSN, which will be available by year's end, is focused on offering tools and services that would appeal to those with high-speed connections. The biggest enhancements are MSN's new tools for digital photo enthusiasts, which let them search photos more easily, insert pictures into a slideshow with music and more quickly send and receive pictures as small, compressed files.

MSN also is offering new features to let subscribers view and manage multiple e-mail accounts. Users can also choose to share their online appointment books with one another, so that co-workers, friends and family can check one another's calendars to schedule outings.

MSN's new offering is a start, said Rob Enderle, principal analyst with San Jose, Calif.-based Enderle Group.

"I'm impressed by the direction and sense of where it's going," he said. "They (Microsoft) seem to finally grasp the fact that it needs to be a strategic part of Microsoft."

Opera 7.2 Built for Speed

Opera Software ASA has released a beta version of the next release of its Web browser for Windows that features faster performance and support for bidirectional languages.

Opera 7.20 for Windows Beta, announced Wednesday, focuses on improving Java Script performance, once a weak point for Opera, as well as faster user interface, and Web page rendering and reformatting, said Opera CEO Jon S. von Tetzchner.

"We want information to come on the screen as fast as possible," von Tetzchner said. "This has been a focus since Version 1.0."

The newest browser release also builds on the 40-plus languages Opera already supports. It now supports bidirectional languages, those such as Hebrew and Arabic that incorporate a mixture of writing from left to right

and from right to left.

The beta of Opera 7.20 for Windows comes as the Oslo, Norway, company seeks to capitalize on shifting development plans in the browser market. Microsoft Corp. has said that it is ending development on new stand-alone versions of its dominant Internet Explorer browser, instead focusing on upgrades to IE included within Windows. Observers also widely expect AOL Time Warner to end development of Netscape.

"People would like to see their browser updated, and IE is beginning to look a bit old," von Tetzchner said. "From companies running cross platforms or not running Windows, we are seeing an increase in them contacting us and wanting to use Opera."

The Opera's browser, currently in the 7.11 release for Windows, traditionally has been used by individuals or been embedded in smart phones and PDAs. While the larger business market once was not viable, Opera in the past few months has begun hearing from enterprises concerned about IE development being tied to OS release, von Tetzchner said.

A full release of Opera 7.20 for Windows is expected by the end of the summer, with versions for Linux, Sun Solaris and FreeBSD to follow soon after, Tetzchner said. It will cost \$39 for a version without advertising, while a free download will be available for users accepting ads. The beta version is available at www.opera.com.

Opera also has a Mac version and released last week Version 6.03 to supporting Apple Computer Inc.'s upcoming Jaguar release of Mac OS X.

Macworld Expo moves to Boston in 2004

IDG World Expo on Friday announced that Macworld Conference & Expo will take place in Boston in the summer of 2004 instead of New York. The fate of a New York-based expo has been up in the air since last October when IDG World Expo said they were moving the show to Boston - Apple told MacCentral at the time that they would not participate in a Boston expo.

The dates for the summer expo have been confirmed for July 12-15, 2004 at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center.

"After research and discussions with key stakeholders, including vendors, consultants and attendees, it is clear that Macworld Conference & Expo in Boston will provide great value to the Mac community," said David Korse, president of IDG World Expo. "We are excited to move ahead with our plans to present a Macworld event in Boston that will provide valuable education and networking opportunities for Mac enthusiasts."

Although a fiery battle between Apple and then IDG World Expo President, Charlie Greco followed the planned move to Boston - including Greco's statement that he would ban Apple from Macworld San Francisco - cooler heads finally prevailed. The two sides came to an agreement about Apple's participation in an East Coast show for 2003 and continued talks for San Francisco.

Macworld Conference & Expo changed its name a couple of times before settling on Macworld CreativePro as IDG World Expo moved the focus of the show more on the Macintosh (news - web sites) creative community. But

CreativePro was apparently not successful enough to continue on in New York.

"While there was some uncertainty about the event coming to Boston after the successful launch of Macworld CreativePro in New York this summer, we have decided to continue the Macworld tradition on the East Coast as originally planned," said Korse. "We look forward to the Macintosh community gathering in Boston."

In a statement given to MacCentral on Friday, Apple reiterated the stance the company took earlier this year: Apple will not participate in Macworld Boston.

"When IDG initially announced its plans to move summer Macworld to Boston in 2004, we were very clear that we didn't think it was a good move," Apple said in their statement. "Our position stands and Apple will not be participating in Macworld Boston. We are 100 percent committed to Macworld San Francisco in January every year."

Why Do Ink Cartridges Cost So Much?

At \$22 per quarter-ounce, a Hewlett-Packard color ink-jet cartridge is more expensive, by weight, than imported Russian caviar.

Observing such high prices, Connecticut research consultant Zel Dolinsky wants to know the reasons for them. "How come, with printer prices falling, ink prices are still so outrageous?" Dolinsky asks. "I'm appalled."

Ink jet and toner cartridges are fanning angry sparks in the ink cartridge replacement market--a \$21 billion field, according to Lyra Research.

Consumers are annoyed at the price of authorized replacement ink cartridges, and tempted by third-party substitutes that don't always work flawlessly.

The major vendors, including Canon, Epson, Hewlett-Packard, and Lexmark, are at odds with independent manufacturers of alternative inks. In fact, some big vendors are suing third-party makers of cartridge clones for alleged patent violations. Meanwhile, second-tier ink cartridge makers say they simply offer consumers a choice - at prices that are sometimes 75 percent below what major vendors charge.

That leaves consumers in printout purgatory. They must either pony up for name-brand ink, or risk substandard printouts by buying replacement ink jet cartridges from a generic distributor. As PC World has found, however, plenty of worthy third-party replacement ink jets are also available.

The big-name vendors say that the third-party ink is inferior to brand-name versions. And certainly, the brands dominate; together, Canon, Epson, HP, and Lexmark account for 84 percent of the ink replacement market, Lyra Research reports.

Recently, the controversy has caught the attention of overseas regulators. Trustbusters in the United Kingdom and at the European Union are examining the way Canon, Epson, HP, and Lexmark price ink and do business. In the United States, at least one state is attempting to protect consumers' right to purchase third-party alternative goods.

The printer supplies industry has adopted the practice of cell phone and razor blade sellers: Charge low prices for initial equipment, then make money from ongoing fees for additional needed components. Vendors sell consumer printers at cost, or even sometimes at a 20 percent loss, say financial analysts at Bear Stearns who track Epson and HP. But on the flip side, both firms earn a 60 percent gross margin on ink jet and toner cartridges, says Bill Hand, financial analyst with Bear and Stearns.

Those numbers are not exactly true, the vendors say. HP does make money on its printer hardware, according to Pradeep Jotwani, senior vice president of imaging supplies. In a prepared statement, Epson says that it "makes a reasonable profit on both" printer hardware and ink.

Still, consumers grouse about the "give away the razor and sell the blades" business model. Hence, the birth of a market for recyclers to refill used cartridges, or sell cartridge clones at half the price of the brand-name items.

Not surprisingly, printer vendors characterize this aftermarket as a financial threat, Hand says. "It's fair to say at least 80 percent of overall profits [from within Epson's and HP's printing divisions] come from supplies," he says.

Lexmark has tried to suppress the makers of aftermarket cartridges by integrating a microchip, dubbed a "killer chip," inside its own laser jet toner cartridges. If a Lexmark printer doesn't spot the Lexmark chip inside a cartridge, the unit won't work. The only way to reuse the cartridge is by sending it back to Lexmark, which will refill the empty tank and reset the microchip for another use.

If you try to refill the Lexmark toner cartridge yourself with third-party toner, or if you use a compatible cartridge that lacks the microchip, the printer won't accept it. The microchip and Lexmark printers have the intelligence to "expire" toner cartridges and use only Lexmark goods. Critics worry that it's only a matter of time before Lexmark introduces the chip to its ink jet product family.

Epson integrates chips to authenticate its cartridges, too, but it takes a slightly less extreme approach: You can reuse its ink jet cartridges by refilling them. But a used Epson microchip and cartridge lose some functions, such as the ability to record ink levels.

Caught in the middle, many consumers remain angry about the high cost of ink.

"I know they're in the business of making money, but sometimes you can go too far," Dolinsky says of the recurring ink jet cartridge costs associated with his \$150 HP DeskJet.

Predictably, HP and others say their cartridge prices aren't high considering the cost of researching and developing the technology and then manufacturing the equipment. "These aren't just bottles of ink you put inside of your printer," Jotwani says.

He points out that HP's ink jet cartridges are very sophisticated. For example, each has 40 microscopic nozzles that precisely expel billions of ink dots across a page. HP is also fastidiously attentive to ink quality, Jotwani says, to assure uniform viscosity and color.

Calling ink prices high may largely be a matter of perspective, some analysts say. When printers cost \$500, no one complained about \$30 ink jet cartridges, says John Shane, CAP Ventures analyst. But since 1996, the average cost of a personal ink jet printer has dropped by 60 percent, according to CAP Ventures, from approximately \$426 to an average of \$169 in 2002. Meanwhile, CAP Ventures also reports, the average price per printed page has risen by 12.5 percent, from 8 cents per page to 9 cents per page, in the same timeframe.

CAP Ventures says that it doesn't count the cost of the printer itself in figuring prices per page; it's based largely on the cost of cartridges. The analysts attribute the higher per-page costs largely to the fact that the average page printed today contains more cartridge-draining graphics and images than even a couple years ago.

High ink jet prices among dominant ink manufacturers have caught the attention of U.K. and European Union regulators.

Following a year-long investigation, a U.K. agency called the Office of Fair Trade (OFT) has recommended that Canon, Epson, HP, and Lexmark more clearly tell consumers their likely long-term printing costs. Printer makers have until October 2003 to better communicate the total cost of printer ownership, after which they face possible OFT monetary fines.

In December 2002, the European Union launched a similar investigation. "We are evaluating barriers to entry into this market, prices, and contracts that lock businesses into long-term relationships with OEM ink makers," says Tilman Lueder, European Union spokesperson.

Both investigations stem from consumer price complaints. Overseas regulators say that the gripes also came from remanufacturers and generic vendors, who claim that Epson and Lexmark are making it very hard to make compatible aftermarket clones.

Lexmark is challenging the third parties in court. Last December, the printer vendor sued North Carolina-based Static Control Components, which makes and sells clones of Lexmark's microchips to recyclers.

Lexmark is accusing Static Control of contravening the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which makes it illegal to circumvent any digital technology used by a company to protect its intellectual property.

Many Lexmark buyers agree to return the cartridges to Lexmark in exchange for a rebate. This enables Lexmark to limit competition in the aftermarket, say analysts. A judge in Lexmark's home state of Kentucky has ruled in favor of Lexmark; and for now, Static Control is forced to put its microchips on ice.

A twist to the Static Control case came on August 7, when North Carolina Governor Mike Easley signed into law a bill giving North Carolina residents the right to refill any ink jet or toner cartridge. The law doesn't directly address Lexmark's DMCA concerns, but it bolsters buyers' rights.

Under the North Carolina law, consumers and businesses that have contracts with service agents can refill or use third-party cartridges despite printer manufacturers' user agreements requiring consumers to use only the vendors' ink. The bill does not address warranty issues.

European regulators are considering a law to ban printer and cartridge manufacturers from using Lexmark-style "killer" chips that leave expended

cartridges unusable. The EU claims that the use of such chips just loads landfills with empty cartridges.

Lexmark declined comment for this report. But the public will likely be hearing a lot more about the cost of printing. Spending in U.S. retail stores on toner and ink jet cartridges is forecast to jump 43 percent by 2007, to \$26.3 billion, according to Cap Ventures.

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